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Comments on French, "A Defence of Representational Realism"

In his contribution to this anthology, Robert French defends a version of indirect realism, which he calls "representational realism", against several objections. I will here comment on French's responses (1) to the regress objection, (2) to the objection that perception is manifestly direct, and (3) to the objection from ordinary language.

(1) Ryle (1949) argues that, if we understand S's perception of an ordinary physical object via her sensing of a purely mental *sensum*, we end up with an infinite regress. For we will have to understand S's sensing of this *sensum* in terms her sensing another *sensum*, and so on. French (p. 6) responds to this by arguing that the alleged regress arises from the fact that our ordinary perception verbs (such as 'perceive', 'sense') are transitive. They suggest that there is a distinction between the perceiver and what she perceives. Later on (p. 12) he argues that we need to rationally reconstruct our ordinary language to allow for a phenomenal variant of perception verbs – corresponding to our sensing of percepts – which is not transitive.

I disagree with French both on the point that the feature of perception verbs of being transitive is to blame for the apparent regress, and on the point that introducing intransitive perception verbs for percepts has a bearing on the regress problem. That verbs like 'perceive' or 'sense' are transitive means that they take an object. For instance, we might say that Miyumi senses the heat of the fire, or that Oscar senses a red and round sense-datum. But this way of talking is not what is at the bottom of the regress. The regress, I believe, is due to the fact that perceiving an ordinary physical thing is taken, by Ryle, to be the same kind of perceptual relation as sensing a percept. Given this, if the former relation needs to be understood in terms of a further sensing relation, then the same is true for the latter relation.

But why should the representational realist accept that they are the same kind of relation? It seems natural to say that the perceptual relation between me and a thing in the external world requires a completely different account than the relation between me and the content of my awareness, understood as the thing that is currently on my mind. It seems that the burden of proof is on French's opponent to show that just because ordinary perceiving is a relation to an object, as is sensing, it is both times the same kind of relation.

Secondly, I am not convinced by French's attempt to get rid of the appearance of a regress by introducing intransitive 'sensing'-locutions. An example he gives (p. 12) is "an active voice equivalent to the passive voice 'redness is sensed (or apprehended) in a particular location in my phenomenal perceptual field'". The idea is that this locution drops the distinction between the sensor and what is sensed, so that we are not moved to account for yet another relation of someone's sensing something.

My worry here is that this rephrasing makes no difference to the regress threat. If there are phenomenal features that are sensed in someone's perceptual field, the fact of the matter is that there is a subject, that the subject has a perceptual field, and that the perceptual field includes certain sensible features. If so, there will be some or other relation between the subject, her perceptual field, and the included features. Even if French were to adopt something like a qualia view of perceptual experience, which rejects an act/object distinction between sensing and percept, we can still ask how the subject, her perceptual experiences, and their qualitative features are related. We can expect that the relation will turn out to be quite different from that between a perceiver and a perceived worldly object.

This indeed removes the regress threat. Note, however that what is doing the work now is not how we talk, but the representational realist's insistence that the sensing relation and the perceiving relation are simply different; which is, as I have argued, the way one should respond to the regress objection in the first place.

(2) French discusses the worry that a representational realist cannot allow that perception is direct, i.e., puts us in immediate touch with our surroundings, even though it manifestly does. In response, he dis-

tinguishes two senses of 'direct'. The first (epistemic) sense incorporates the idea that perception is non-inferential and results in the claim that the percept involved in a perceptual state is qualitatively identical with the perceived worldly object. The second (ontological) sense involves the idea that there are no causal intermediaries between percept and perceived worldly object. According to this reading, percept and perceived worldly object must be numerically identical. French concedes that representational realism cannot make room for directness in the second ontological sense (which he finds problematic anyway), but argues that the view is at least not committed to denying epistemic directness.

I want to point out here that there is a third sense of 'direct', viz. that what is present to our consciousness in perception, or partly constitutes its subjective character, is the worldly objects (and the properties they instantiate) themselves. This seems to be what naive realists and direct realists more generally have in mind – there are no other entities such as sense-data that we are really immediately aware of, and that then represent worldly objects to us. This – call it the central sense of 'direct' – differs from the epistemic sense that French describes. It is concerned not with the process by which we arrive at perception, but with a constitutive description of what perception involves. A direct realist can even allow that there are subpersonal analogues of inferences going on in the perceptual systems when we perceive. Even if this is the case, it is possible that the phenomenal character of perception is constituted by the things we perceive and their properties.

Moreover, the central sense of 'direct' is not the same as French's ontological sense, for it doesn't identify the worldly thing perceived with anything, particularly not with a percept. (Admittedly, it partly grounds the conscious character of perception in features of the worldly things that are perceived. But that is not to say there is an identity between two objects, a percept and a worldly object.) On the one hand, this kind of directness allows that there is a difference between the mental state of perceiving and the thing perceived. On the other hand, it is naturally combined with a denial that there is a percept as the non-physical immediate object of perception. So, the worldly object that is perceived cannot be identified with this alleged immediate object either. A proponent of this kind of directness of perception *can* allow that there is a percept involved in perceiving, when we take this to be a subpersonal representation, or vehicle, which underlies the subject's perceiving the worldly object. Note, however, that the representational vehicle is not what is perceived, on such a view, but is merely something that is involved in making the subject's perception of the object possible. So again, there is no need to commit on the perceived object's identity with the percept.

I believe that saving this third sense of 'direct' is what direct realists are concerned with; their criticism of indirect realist views is that they deny that perception is direct in this sense.

(3) French argues that our ordinary language about perception is theory-laden in that it allows only for a physical object of perception, and not for the phenomenal sense of 'sense' or 'perceive' that representational realism needs. It presupposes the truth of naive realism. (p. 10/11) He appeals to J. L. Austin (1962), who denies that ordinary language contains two senses of 'perceive'. According to French's reading, Austin endorses the claim that ordinary language only ever ascribes to us that we perceive *physical* objects.

I have to disagree with French's interpretation of Austin on this last point. I think the correct way to think about him is as a pluralist about the nature of the objects of perception. Austin mocks the philosophical claim that ordinary people believe that the only things we perceive are "moderate-sized specimens of dry goods" (Austin 1962, p. 8). Austin himself claims, by contrast:

There is no *one* kind of thing that we 'perceive' but many *different* kinds ...: pens are in many ways though not in all ways unlike rainbows, which are in many ways though not in all ways unlike after-images, which in turn are in many ways but not in all ways unlike pictures on the cinema-screen – and so on, without assignable limit. (Austin 1962, p. 4)

A further, clearly non-physical object that he allows that a deluded subject may experience is a mirage. (Austin 1962, p. 32) Additionally, he (1962, p. 95) holds that if a subject sees an object, this entails that

the object exists – though he allows that it may not have the properties that the subject perceives it as having. Given this, Austin is clearly willing to say that rainbows, after-images, or even mirages exist, even though we ordinarily would not consider them to be material objects. He thinks that their existence is presupposed in ordinary language.

So French's interesting claim that ordinary language conflicts with the claims of representational realism doesn't go through if Austin is correct: Ordinary language, on Austin's view, allows that all kinds of regular or outlandish things may be perceived – the only assumption that ordinary language has trouble with is that something is seen where *nothing* exists.

So, for Austin, ordinary language is not theory-laden in the way French suggests. At the same time, Austin would certainly resist French's move to introduce two distinct senses of 'sense', 'perceive', or the like. This move perpetuates the picture of perception that Austin wants to resist – that we can never be said to perceive run-of-the-mill things around us, period. He tries to resist this move by making it superfluous: There is no need to introduce a way of talking about perception of sense-data (or percepts) in addition to our ordinary talk about perception. For our ordinary ways of speaking about perception already perfectly cover everything that we can perceive.

References

J. L. Austin (1962). *Sense and Sensibilia*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.